



ISSUE: RAILROAD/HIGHWAY GRADE CROSSING SAFETY IMPROVEMENTS

Iowa's Rail Transportation System

Iowa's rail transportation system provides both freight and passenger service. Rail transports a variety of goods, including those within Iowa and those to other states as well as to foreign markets. While rail competes with other modes, it also cooperates with those modes to provide intermodal service to Iowans.

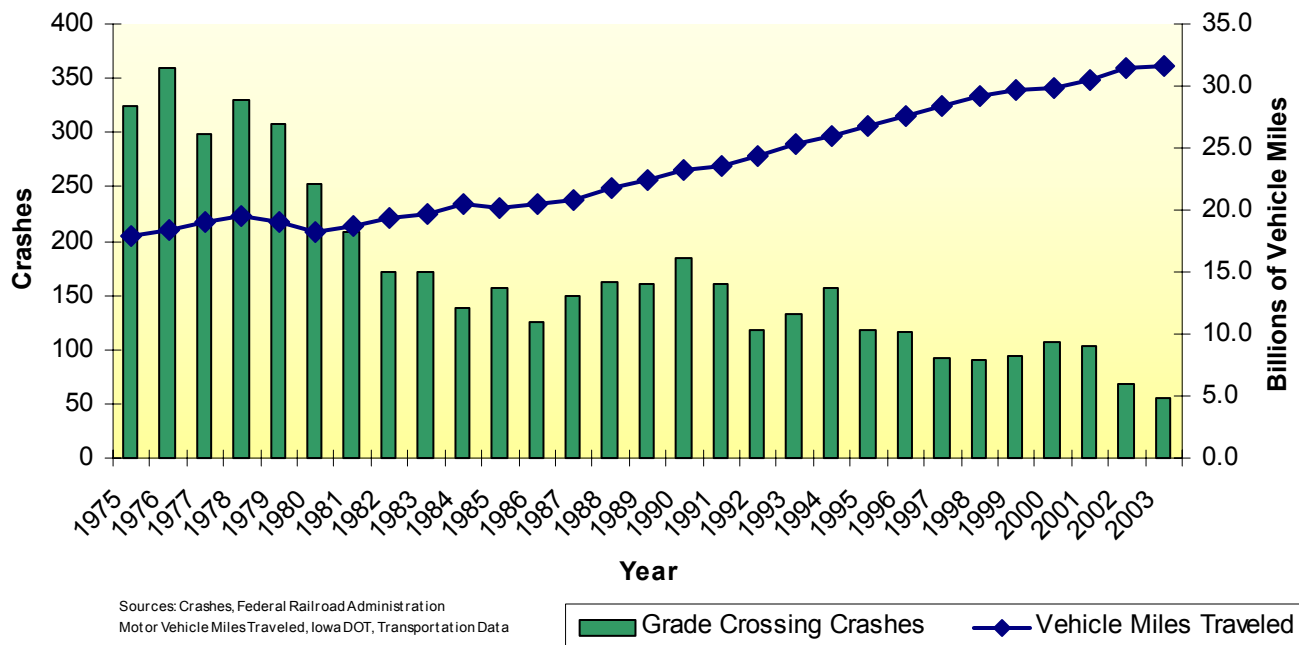
Iowa's rail system and service has been evolving over time relative to its size, financial condition, and competition from other modes. Iowa's railroad mileage peaked in 1911 at approximately 10,500 miles. Today, Iowa has 4,116 miles of rail freight track operated by 19 railroad companies. In 2002, 45.7 million tons of freight originated in Iowa and 38.6 million tons of freight terminated in the state.

Two transcontinental Amtrak passenger routes, operating on BNSF freight lines, pass through Iowa. The lines include the California Zephyr, with service between Chicago and San Francisco, and the Southwest Chief, with service between Chicago and Los Angeles. Amtrak stops at six passenger rail stations in Iowa and has an annual Iowa ridership of approximately 47,442 passengers.

Rail/Highway Crossings

With the decrease in operating mileage, the number of rail/highway crossings in Iowa has also naturally declined. Iowa has 8,261 at-grade highway-rail crossings in the state: 3,805 of those crossings are on private roads; and 4,456 are on public roads.

Grade Crossing Crashes and Motor Vehicle Miles Traveled



Number of Motor Vehicle-Related Crashes

According to the Federal Railroad Administration, there were 61 highway-rail crossing crashes in Iowa in 2003. Through September 2004, there have been 60 crashes.

Despite a continued upward trend in number of motor vehicle miles of travel, there has been a fairly steady decline in highway-rail crossing crashes since the peak in 1976.

Contributing to this decline are three state- and federally-funded rail crossing repair and improvement programs: State Grade Crossing Surface Repair Program; State Grade Crossing Safety Program; and the Federal-Aid Rail/Highway Crossing Safety Fund.

In recognition that highway motorists benefit the most from crossing safety, the DOT uses state road use tax funds to assist railroads in maintaining signal devices and in repairing crossing surfaces.

Improving rail crossing safety

Presently, Iowa's crossings have better warning and protection devices than in the past. The number of crossings with signals and gates has increased as a result of investments made by railroads, local jurisdictions and the state to improve crossing safety.

The Federal Highway Administration's safety program has provided funding to the states for 30 years to improve safety of public railroad/highway grade crossings. These funds are typically used to install new crossing signal devices or upgrade existing signals. The funding is also used to provide low-cost improvements, such as increased sight distance, increased signal lens size, extend or repair crossing surfaces, or close crossings.

In recent years, the Iowa DOT has employed a number of ways to target federal and state

safety funding to increase safety at the crossings, including:

- On-site reviews of crossings with accident history, higher vehicle or train traffic, Amtrak service, or any other physical condition that could indicate safety problems;
- Work with the railroads and highway authorities to support crossing closure, where appropriate;
- Send annual letters to all highway authorities and railroads, identifying their specific crossings with accident history and traffic information, to encourage review of safety issues at crossings under their jurisdiction;
- Participate in on-site safety evaluation of crossings on a rail line requested by a railroad or highway authority (city for municipal streets; county for secondary roads; and state for primary roads). The line segment review provides an opportunity for parties to meet and discuss safety concerns relating to each specific at-grade crossing; and
- On Dec. 14, 2004, the Iowa Transportation Commission approved funding to replace deteriorated cross-bucks and posts at passive crossings throughout the state.

Other factors contributing to rail crossing safety

There are a number of reasons why crossing accidents are decreasing. Many of the same reasons for the reduction in highway fatalities also apply to crossing crashes: increased seat belt usage, safer vehicles, tougher drunk driving laws, better driver education for teenagers and seniors, safer roads, etc.

Other efforts like Operation Lifesaver (an education program), targeted enforcement of crossing violators, and changes in the laws relating to crossing violations have all improved crossing safety over the years.